
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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| Landmark/District: | The Harrison Flats | (x) Agenda |
| Address: | 704 3rd Street, NW | () Consent |
| Meeting Date: | September 22, 2011 | (x) Demolition |
| Case Number: | 11-343 | (x) Addition |
| | | (x) Alterations |
| Staff Reviewer: | Tim Dennée | (x) Concept |

The applicant, owner Renaissance Centro 3rd Street LLC (Zuckerman Brothers, Inc.), with R2L Architects, requests the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to construct a twelve-story, 130-foot-tall (plus 18'6" mechanical penthouse) hotel addition to the landmark Harrison Flats, the oldest apartment building in Washington. The landmark building itself would be demolished except for its street- and alley-facing exterior walls and perhaps an internal lightwell and stair, because of its structural condition and the fact that the project calls for parking beneath a portion of the building. Portions of the façade would be rebuilt because of movement in the masonry.

Background

The Harrison, likely named for incoming president Benjamin Harrison, was constructed in two sections in 1888-1890. The southern section, with the corner tower at G Street, was erected as apartments or flats from the end of 1888. Like other examples of the earliest purpose-built apartments, the Harrison took the form of super-sized rowhouses with projecting bays. When more or less complete in the summer of 1889, the federal government leased the building on the condition that owner Harvey Spalding would build a large north addition to be finished by the end of the year. The government was to use the building as the executive offices of the Census Bureau as the agency staffed up to conduct the eleventh decennial census the following year.¹ As a consequence, the north addition was structured for office loading and to be "fire proof," with a system of steel columns and beams supporting brick and concrete floor arches. The original, south section had been conventionally framed with wood. Described as six stories, the building has only five above grade, plus a full basement that had become a café by the turn of the century.

The Census Office may have remained only until 1892, when the administrative offices moved to the Inter-Ocean Building. From then on, the building was principally residential, although it retained the ground-floor and basement retail spaces. The property changed hands several times, and the two sections were briefly under separate ownership, before the building was renamed the

¹ The census office occupied the property from the beginning of 1890, but there was finish work still occurring well into the year. Most of the rest of the 1,200 census clerks were housed in the new Inter-Ocean Building on 9th Street between E and F, with overflow in the Pension Building. The 3rd and G location was the inspiration for the "Census Pharmacy" that opened across the street in 1890.

Astoria in 1899 and thoroughly renovated by 1902. Another renovation of 1941 coincided with another renaming, with the building since known as the Canterbury.

New construction

This is the third concept application, each from a different owner, for a similarly massed project since 2006. The prior two were approved by the Board. Each time, the proposed use and the architecture have changed, but the height, width, the massing relationship to the landmark, and the base material (brick) have remained essentially the same. The innovations in the present design include a large entrance canopy and a glassy, partial “attic” story. Projecting bays have been added to the west side of the building to match those on the east, made possible by the purchase of air rights over the adjacent property. The development of the design has eliminated issues of out-of-scale openings, but the proportions or method of division of the glazing in the attic story might use another look. At its height, the usefulness of the entrance canopy for purposes other than signaling the entrance is reduced.

Demolition

Through each of the three concept applications, the level of demolition proposed has increased, although each of the former ones proposed demolition of much of the west wall of the landmark and interior partitions but made no mention of removal of the floors or roof. The interior of the building is not designated, so under a previous owner, the non-loadbearing walls were demolished. Unfortunately, now that a use is proposed that might be compatible with the tiny, former apartments, they are gone.

The condition of the building has declined dramatically in the years since the staff first toured it (about 2004). The structural engineer’s report, attached, outlines the major issues. Having gone through a succession of owners, it is difficult to apportion responsibility for neglect of the property, but not maintaining a sufficiently sound roof and secured window openings has caused a cascade of effects. Water entering the building has rotted much of the wood framing of the southern portion of the building and the roof. While an original interior wood party wall may remain sound, it is difficult to conceive removing all the surrounding framing and nailing new framing to it. Especially with repeated freezing, the water has also caused movement in the masonry walls; the west, “rear” wall, made of common brick, is in the worst shape.

The steel framing of the north section is corroded but, perhaps more important, the brick and concrete arches it supports have pushed outward and flattened to a degree that makes them unsalvageable. The steel columns surrounding the north stair could be retained and reused (especially as they have decorative Corinthian capitals), possibly in a decorative manner only, and the area of floors from the stairwell out to the four surrounding columns could probably be retained and supported to keep that core intact.

The large, hexagonal light well and the brick stair/elevator core were not a central focus of the engineers’ report, and while there may be some condition issues, their location in the center of the building has protected them from the degree of weathering and movement that the roof and outer walls have been subjected to. It is recommended that these be retained, as they almost certainly can be repaired. While at first glance, such features may seem insignificant, they are characteristic of apartment construction of this early period and as important as any remaining interior element.

The earliest fire escapes, being both original and decorative, will be retained. Other fire escapes may or may not be retained; the application has not definitively settled this, although the elevation drawings indicate that all but one would be removed.

Reconstruction

The structural engineers have pointed out the damage caused by the movement of the façade. There are two bays of the 10th Street façade—that over the southern, arched entry depicted on Sheet S2.03 in the back of the report, and that immediately north of the northern entrance on Sheet S2.04—that the engineers have recommended for reconstruction. This is obviously a challenge in light of the fact that the demolition will probably have occurred by the time this work happens, and the façade will be isolated and braced.² It is doubly a challenge to deconstruct such a wall and seamlessly put it back into place; it is a thing easier said than done. Whereas the northernmost bay proposed for reconstruction at least superficially appears to be in better condition than the southern, it is recommended that, especially for that one, alternatives that can keep the wall in place be explored further.

Conclusion

As the discussion above suggests, the staff has acknowledged that, consistent with preservation philosophy, damaged materials may be removed and replaced as necessary. The aim has been to retain those features—especially structural ones and those characteristic of early apartments—that can be saved and incorporated into the new construction, in order to balance the preservation interest with the programmatic one; to ensure a safe and sound building; and to avoid a degree of demolition that would effectively demolish the building and require a Mayor’s Agent hearing.

The staff recommends that the Board approve the project in concept, with a delegation to staff of further review, with the conditions that the applicant retain, repair and incorporate the brick stairwell/elevator core and the floors extending out from it to, and including, the four surrounding steel columns, as well as the large, hexagonal lightwell; that alternatives to reconstruction of the damaged bays of the 10th Street elevation be explored; that the earliest fire escapes be retained; and that a high standard will be applied to restoring the remaining fabric of the landmark and replacing elements such as windows.

² And it is not clear whether the excavation and underpinning for the garage would occur before or after this work.